



NEPAL

LEFT OF ZERO

A glimpse of Army Special Operations Forces performing crisis response following a 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Nepal.

BY MASTER SERGEANT MITCHELL ELWOOD

April 25, 2015 started out as a beautiful, high-mountain morning in Nepal as a Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha waited near the tarmac at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan airport for the arrival of a second SFOD-A on a C-130. It was the peak of the year's first climbing season with several trekkers and climbers returning to Nepal optimistic after the previous year's devastating snowstorm. The avalanches in 2014 killed at least 41 people during a season optimal for mountaineering and tourism. The 2014 disasters prompted Nepal's Mahabir Rangers and a partner SFODA to schedule a joint combined exchange training event focusing on high-alpine search and rescue to bolster the Mahabir Ranger's technical mountain rescue capability. The detachment also wanted to train and test its own high-alpine capability as the only mountain team assigned to 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) forward-stationed in Okinawa, Japan. This JCET included counter-terrorism training conducted by another SFODA concurrently in Nagarkot, while the forward deployed SFODA contin-

ued training with the Mahabir Rangers near Jomsom on glaciers at 16,000 feet.

In preparation for working at high elevations, the SFODA trekked with members of the Mahabir Rangers to Everest Base Camp and Kala Patthar up to 18,519 feet. Specialized communications equipment and de-centralized operations planning were incorporated into the mission to mitigate risk should the detachment's three-man rope teams become separated. Each rope team had multiple satellite and VHF communications systems. The detachment also requested avalanche experts stationed at the Special Forces Advanced Mountain Operations School in Fort Carson, Colorado, to the event. The SFAMOS mountain detachment was eager to provide its non-commissioned officer in charge, to assist. An American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education instructor and Bergfuhrer mountain guide, the NCO was a welcome addition to a challenging JCET. After the EBC trek, the detachment sent three members to Pokhara to receive the new SFODA's gear and transition it to Jomsom aboard Nepal military aircraft while the rest of the team awaited the arrival of the other SFODA at Tribhuvan airport.

The beautiful April day suddenly took a turn for the worse. The earth began to shake violently and the tarmac began to undulate as the wings of parked aircraft moved up down. As nearby walls began to crumble, the SFODA moved to an open area close to the tarmac and watched as many of Kathmandu's



SOF CRISIS RESPONSE

buildings collapsed into puffs of dust and smoke. During this 7.8 earthquake, the C-130 carrying the arriving SFODA was on final approach, and had no choice but to land in the middle of the chaos. The pilot's expertise ensured the safe landing of the C-130. The SFODA detachment commander, team sergeant and chief warrant officer ran to greet the arriving team, informing them about the earthquake. It was then that all the Green Berets knew the JCET's original plan would drastically change.

The SFODAs regrouped at the U.S. Embassy in Kathmandu and immediately offered their services to the Ambassador, Peter Bodde, and Department of State personnel. Initially, the Embassy personnel were concerned with their families, personal survival and "dusting off" their disaster SOPs. Ambassador Bodde watched as the local national staff left the embassy en masse to check on their loved ones, while an influx of U.S. citizens seeking shelter steadily flowed into the Embassy's compounds. The senior Defense Attaché Officer acknowledged the desire of the SFODA's to help; however, he noted that the U.S. Government's official Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief and SAR response was in the hands of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance with their Disaster Assistance Response Teams. The DART team would fly from the U.S. mainland to the Kathmandu airport, which was not yet receiving airplanes due to damage from the earthquake. The Green Berets knew they needed to provide their capabilities in order to

assist in the growing crisis while DART teams were still days or weeks away.

The Green Berets first opportunity came from talking to the Regional Security Officer. His dilemma was securing the U.S. Embassy compound after the local security guards left their posts. The RSO also needed to respond to trapped U.S. school children separated from their parents, worked at the U.S. Embassy. The detachment's weapons sergeants quickly volunteered to help secure the Embassy's compounds while other members of the SFODAs used the RSO's vehicles to rescue the school children and bring them safely back to the U.S. Embassy.

Upon their return to the embassy, the Green Berets realized the embassy's clinic was unmanned. The clinic's nurse would take a while to get there due to the destroyed roads and bridges. The detachment's medical sergeants began treating patients flowing into the embassy with injuries. These same men would later conduct multiple hospital assessments in support of the U.S. Government's response and worked closely with the U.S. Embassy's clinic nurse to treat the injured.

As hundreds of U.S. citizens poured into the embassy, another dilemma quickly came to light: the local nationals who worked in the kitchen had departed, leaving the kitchen empty with hundreds of people to feed. A culinary specialist assigned to the newly arrived SFOD-A took over the U.S. Embassy kitchen and assigned duties to Peace Corps volunteers and displaced U.S. citizens to feed the masses. The Soldier

PHOTOS ABOVE FROM LEFT
Members of the 1st SFG(A) observe the damage following a 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Nepal in April 2015; SFODA members consult with first responders to determine what assistance was needed; A Special Forces Medical Sergeant prepares a stretcher to evacuate a survivor from the rubble.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS
COURTESY OF 1ST SFG(A) PAO



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01
Damage to buildings in Pokhara, Nepal. The 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck 50 miles east of Pokhara.

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Damage to the village of Kyangin Gumpa caused by an air blast from the Langtang Valley below. The earthquake caused a landslide that flattened the Langtang village and sent an airblast up the mountain leaving destruction in its wake.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS COURTESY
OF 1ST SFG(A) PAO

ensured thousands of meals were prepared for U.S. citizens and rescue workers.

After the Green Berets and their enablers secured the compound, rescued school children and fed the masses, Ambassador Bodde and key DoS staff took notice. During a late night conversation between the Ambassador and detachment leadership, he asked the Green Berets how else they could help. The leadership explained their capabilities to conduct detailed assessments of the hard hit areas in Nepal and rescue U.S. citizens trapped in the Himalayan high-mountain regions. The Ambassador then said he would do anything he could to support them.

As the SFODAs were demonstrating their value to the DoS and coordinating with the Mahabir Rangers to develop search and rescue plans, situation reports were sent to the 1st Battalion, 1st SFG(A) battalion commander and Special Operations Command Pacific informing them of their capabilities and challenges. With the support of the battalion commander and then-SOCPAC Commander, Rear Admiral Colin Kilrain, the SFOD-A planned to execute high-altitude SAR in the Himalayas as well as conduct assessments and SAR in Kathmandu and surrounding areas.

The support from higher headquarters emulated the concept of mission command's decentralized command and control. The detachments proved to their commanders they could plan for contingencies and adjust to decentralized operations with maturity. These SOF-capable operations in Nepal would lay the groundwork in preparation of the U.S. military's planned response with Task Force 505. Task Force 505 is activated for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the PACOM area of responsibility from the Marines of the III Marine Expeditionary Force. With the support of Ambassador Bodde, Lt. Col. Raetz and Rear Adm. Kilrain, the Green Berets were poised to be the initial action arm of the U.S. Government's response in Nepal.

By this time, everyone was aware that 7.8 earthquake devastated portions of Nepal, cut off many trekkers and killed several thousand people. The detachments quickly set up an operations center in order to pool information with the U.S. Consulate staff using a common operating picture. Detachment communications sergeants established lines of communication with all U.S. and host-nation entities. The detachment engineer worked logistic issues with vehicles and equipment to ensure the ODAs were able to mobilize. DoS provided funding for SFODA 1121 to use host-nation helicopters provided by Minga Sherpa's helicopter company. Minga is the first Nepali to climb all 14, 8,000 meter peaks and a concerned citizen. The RSO supplied vehicles to SFODA 1126 to perform assessments of Kathmandu, surrounding areas and assist in urban SAR operations. The PACOM Augmentation



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Team, along with the Civil-Military Support Element leader, were crucial for the effective support of the ARSOF elements in-country. .


The SFOD-A's first high-altitude SAR was to Mt. Everest Base Camp, which was hit by a large avalanche during the earthquake, killing 22 people. The detachment was able to recover an injured U.S. doctor and the remains of Google executive, Dan Fredinburg. Due to limited space on the helicopter, two members of the team remained in Lukla and returned later when aircraft became available. This became standard practice on the rescues. Space was limited on the small, high-altitude capable helicopters and the Green Berets remained behind as rescued personnel returned to safety. Only after all rescued personnel were evacuated on each SAR mission, would the Green Berets return to Kathmandu and refit for the next mission. Members of the SFOD-A were acclimatized, trained, equipped to self-sustain and remain in communication for several days in the Himalayas.

Following the EBC rescue, the SFOD-A SAR teams dispatched to the hardest hit areas of Lantang and Gorkha while assessment teams moved through the Kathmandu and Nagarkot areas. The detachment commander and team sergeant worked closely with the PAT, CMSE and consulate staff to pass information to DoS officials, coordinate with Mahabir Ranger leadership and incoming TF-505 Commander, Brig. Gen. Paul Kennedy. The team coordinated SAR operations in the Himalayas and led assessment teams in Kathmandu Valley. The teams also worked closely with Nepal's helicopter and airplane companies to

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coordinate rescue efforts and schedule SAR windows. Green Berets, working closely with DoS, conducted decentralized planning and execution while responding to five regions of Nepal simultaneously.

Robust communications planning proved to be crucial as Nepal's cell and Internet providers crashed from infrastructure destruction and network saturation. When the earthquake hit, three Green Berets in Pokhara quickly reported in using satellite phones. They were instructed to provide ground truth assessments that would be used to facilitate HADR operations. Members of the team worked closely with Pokhara officials to conduct feasibility assessments of the airport, hospitals and infrastructure. Their assessments helped coordinate appropriate incoming airplanes with relief goods. They also advised and accounted for U.S. citizens during the evacuation process while helping the Nepalese in the aftermath.

SFODAs 1121 and 1126 and their enablers rescued 55 people from 13 different countries on 11 high-altitude SAR missions, assessed five hospitals, treated dozens of casualties, prepared nearly 4,000 meals, accounted for more than 500 U.S. citizens and secured the U.S. Embassy's compounds for two weeks. The detachments only returned to their homestation in Okinawa after conducting a handover with TF-505 and the DART. The PACOM AOR is no stranger to catastrophic natural disasters and this successful display by Green Berets illuminated the need to consider SFOD-As as viable crisis response elements during Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Master Sgt. Mitchell Elwood is the battalion operations non-commissioned officer for the 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne). With 22 years of Army service, Ellwood has deployed to numerous countries throughout the world in support of U.S. national interests. In addition to combat operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Philippines, he has also worked closely with civil-military agencies during humanitarian crises in the Philippines and Nepal.

